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AUTHOR Feeley, Joan T.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a child-centered first grade classroom where learning to read is viewed as a natural step in the language acquisition process. Discussed in detail are methods of individualizing instruction for four particular children, the use of basal readers, daily writing activities using the Language Experience Approach, and both group and independent activities such as a daily sing-along and teaching students to use audiovisual equipment. (AEA)

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ESTABLISHING A PRINT ENVIRONMENT

FOR BEGINNING READERS

Dr. Joan T. Feeley
Professor
Reading/Lanuage Arts
The William Paterson College of
New Jersey
Wayne, New Jersey 07470
U.S.A.

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This paper will describe a first-grade classroom located in an American suburb near New York City. The teacher, Dr. Ethel Lesh, has been teaching beginners to read for over 20 years. Her room reflects her continuous search for methods and materials that will provide an optimum environment for learning to read. Her approach is truly eclectic: she uses the children's own dictated words, basal readers, phonics tapes, and both music and art activities in her reading program.

In this child-centered classroom, learning to read is viewed as a natural step in the language acquisition process. Children are literally immersed in meaningful print as they are read to, use book-record combinations, see their own words written down by their teacher, write their own daily news and stories, sing-a-long with teacher-made songbooks, and read many, many kinds of texts, from basal materials written for instructional purposes to self-selected trade books representing the staples of children's literature.

Reading instruction begins with a whole-class language experience approach (Hall, 1976). In this method, the teacher writes sentences dictated by the children on large chart paper. As children see their words recorded and later read back these charts, they learn to recognize a core of frequently used words, and they learn what reading is all about.

Dr. Lesh calls this first composing-reading activity their "class newspaper." This consists of the day, date, and perhaps one or two

sentences about the weather and some school events. The children first discuss items that may be appropriate and then generate more formal sentences for their teacher to write; they then read their "news" together and individually by turn. Next, the chart is cut into sentence strips that are kept by volunteers in their desks. These are brought out the following day so that the children can compare and contrast the printed forms of their statements.

Through this group activity, the children learn that English is written in a left-to-right direction and that periods and other punctuation marks are needed to separate ideas. They learn to read the days of the week, basic words repeated most days like WE, TODAY, IS, and they begin to generalize some sound-symbol information about our language. For instance, after several exposures to words like TODAY, TO, TUESDAY, some were able to help the teacher spell the word TIME when it came up in a dictated sentence.

By observing the children in this daily language experience, Dr. Lesh learns who can already read, who are ready to begin to read, and who need to grow and develop more perceptually and conceptually before moving from their familiar three-dimensional world of spoken language to the more structured and visually demanding two-dimensional world of print.

To deal with written language, children must have the concept of what a word is. John Downing (1970, 1972, 1974, 1977) has pointed out that

many teachers just assume that their beginning readers understand what they mean when they talk about a "word," a "letter," a "sound." From his studies of beginning readers, he has concluded that some children enter school in a state of "cognitive confusion" about these components of language and about the purposes of reading and writing. This first-grade teacher, with her two decades of teaching experience, has intuitively come to similar conclusions. Through her work with experience writing, she can identify those children who can deal conceptually with the task of reading. She watches for those who can frame a word, point to an initial letter, offer a reasonable guess as to how a word is spelled, and read chart words in other situations. Those who can are started in basal reader systems in small groups.

Individualizing Instruction

During the school year in which the writer observed Dr. Lesh's classroom, four children needed very personalized programs tailored to meet very specific needs. While Ray definitely needed more language experience activities like those suggested by the work of John Downing, Jeffrey, David, and Melinda, at the other end of the spectrum, were already reading when they came to first grade. Too immature to begin to work in a structured set of basal materials, Ray was introduced to the Vox-Com, a machine that allowed him to learn from pupil-teacher constructed phrase and sentence cards. First he would read the cards, recording the message on the magnetic tape at the bottom of each card;

then he would practice reading the cards aloud, with immediate feedback being supplied as he ran the cards through the Vox-Com for validation. Ray did not begin to work in published basals until March of his first-grade year; but by that time, he was encoding and reading back full sentences, had a working sight vocabulary, and was well ready to tackle a set of preprimers which he handled easily.

Through the language experience activities at the begining of the year, Dr. Lesh observed that Jeffrey, David, and Melinda could read most text commonly found in primary classrooms. Instead of starting them in the usual primers, she allowed them to pick out books they wanted to read from Scholastic's REACHING UP collection. Based on Olsen's (1952) principles of seeking, self-selection, and pacing, this approach, known as individualized reading, encourages children to seek out reading as a naturally enjoyable and rewarding experience. They may select from a wide variety of trade and instructional materials and read at their own pace. The teacher meets with each child individually to listen to parts read orally, discuss the the text, and record needs and progress.

Dr. Lesh had a novel way of checking on oral reading that would save time and prepare her for these individual conferences. She would have these three children read their self-selected books into a cassette recorder and listen to them via a tape deck in her car as she drove to and from school. She noted that many times the children picked up new words by themselves as they read through the book, making use of continuous context clues.

Self-selected reading is not just limited to the most proficient readers in this first grade. All children are invited to read or to listen-and-read books of their own choice. A large library of book-record and book-cassette combinations to suit the reading interests of primary children is provided. These are ideal for children whose reading skills have not yet caught up with their reading interests and listening ability.

Besides the well-stocked classroom library, the children may select books from the wider collection found in the school learning center. They keep careful records of all individually selected reading-listening experiences in personal notebooks.

At-home reading is also encouraged. Parents, older siblings, or grandparents are requested to be listeners and to help the children complete a log sheet, listing title of book and both new reading words encountered and new vocabulary words learned. This way the home supports the school program, emphasizing a print environment.

Using Basal Readers

Several sets of published basal materials may be found in this classroom, giving the teacher great flexibility in forming and reforming groups. Also, the children do not easily learn which are the beginner books and thus cannot stigmatize the less-mature who may be moving along more slowly with "Oh, I read that one a long time ago."

During the time this observer spent in this class, there were three basal groups besides the four children already described as having very individualized programs. By the beginning of the spring term, two groups

were reading Scott-Foresman READING UNLIMITED, levels three and four. They were making good use of the three cueing systems described by Kenneth Goodman (1969, 1977): (1) letter-sound relationships that they had internalized through their many experiences with print in meaningful situations; (2) the syntax or grammar of their oral language that made them expect that reading should sound like real, natural language; and (3) semantic or meaning cues that made them expect reading to make sense.

A third group of children were just beginning to make some use of the three cue systems. Since they were relying on a growing stock of sight words, beginning letters, and context to help them predict what the print said, they still needed plenty of practice with primer-level texts. They had used several different series and were then reading from THE BANK STREET READERS. These basals were originally developed for use in urban schools, consequently the stories contain minority group children and city settings. Used in this suburban school, they served to broaden the vicarious experiences of these first graders. Since this series is more "horizontal" than "vertical" in graded difficulty, it was particularly good for the needs of these children.

When Dr. Lesh reads with a group using the same text, it is obvious that she uses Russell Stauffer's (1972, 1980) techniques. In the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA), the teachers sets the stage for reading by discussion and previewing so that the readers will be able to relate the text to what they already know. She encourages the children to make hypotheses about the content <u>before</u> they read. Stauffer calls this the

"feed-forward" phase which helps to set the purpose for reading. Children then read, processing the printed information, to confirm their guesses. The text and teacher supply the immediate feedback to validate their answers.

Daily Writing

The Language Experience Approach remains a staple in this first grade classroom. Toward the latter half of the school year, most of the children can handle simple writing assignments by themselves while those who cannot are helped to compose in group with the teacher as scribe.

To illustrate, one afternoon Dr. Lesh brought a chameleon back after lunch since one group had been reading about lizards. The children were allowed to hold it, observe it, and prepare a home for it. They discussed its habits, appearance, and needs before placing it into a terrarium. Next, the teacher asked the children to give her any words they may not be able to spell that they may want to use in writing about their new class pet. These were written on a chart for ready reference, and the children wrote their own stories, illustrating them with crayon drawings. Five of the less mature children composed a group account which their teacher wrote on large chart paper; they made individual copies and added their pictures.

The "newspaper" was continued in similar fashion with most of the children writing their own four or five sentence newspapers daily and a few dictating and copying a group version.

Composing, illustrating, and reading back original expository and narrative text is an important daily component of this teacher's program.

Group and Independent Activities

Many group and independent activities support this reading program. One daily activity is a sing-a-long. Provided with monthly songbooks typed in primer type, the children sing, following the words in their booklets. These books are another part of the print environment in which these children live.

In effect, this is a variation on the story approach to teaching reading. In this method, the teacher reads a story as the children follow in their books. Then they read it through several times with their teacher. Since the children are often just a little behind the teacher, some call this "echoic" reading, as though the children's voices echo their teacher's. This is not used as a single approach to teaching reading currently, but Dr. Lesh has borrowed the idea, making it enjoyable through music. Songs and poems are meant to to shared orally, and repetition is natual and welcome.

The songbooks also supply the children with a daily art project as they illustrate each song on a blank sheet facing the print. They may use a variety of art media -- cut paper, paints, chalk, crayons -- to illustrate their own songbooks.

Other group activities that children engage in when they are not working directly with their teacher are listening to a record of a book via headsets (four children around a table) and viewing a filmstrip that has been set up by the teacher in the hall. The filmstrip usually has subtitles and is read by the children in turn.

The daily assignments are listed on the chalkboard every morning and reviewed together; the children are expected to complete them by

the end of the day, but they may work on them in any order that they choose. For instance, one listing looked like this:

Finish reading (do workbook page)
Write newspaper
Makeup 10 math equations with the answer 9
Write 2 sentences about a book you are reading
Listen to book-record in hall ("Old MacDonald")
Illustrate today's song
Listen to record with 3 friends (LENTIL by Robert McCloskey)
Do a card in the SRA kit (Science Research Associates)
View the filmstrip in the hall ("Frogs and Turtles")

The children in Dr. Lesh's classes are very independent, learning to use the audio-visual equipment independently early in the school year. They work through the day's assignments, coming together for large group or small group activities when they are summoned.

The school day usually ends with the teacher reading to the class; she usually chooses a book related to some of the day's experiences. For example, on the day they met their new pet chameleon, she read about a relative of the lizard family, TIMOTHY TURTLE.

The approach to reading is definitely eclectic (Feeley and Lesh, 1979) and language based; the emphasis is on reading for meaning from the beginning. There is a carefully planned print environment that invites children to learn to read. Reflecting the role described by psycholinguist Frank Smith (1978), this teacher sets the stage and supplies the important feedback that children need at this stage.

For the year during which the writer observed this class, the end-of-year Metropolitan Reading Tests went from 1.5 to 5.0, supporting the axiom that good teaching increases the range of individual differences. The important thing is that these children not only learned to read, but also learned to be comfortable with print, expecting it as a part of their everyday lives.

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MATERIALS

Book-Record Sets: Scholastic Books, 904 Sylvan Avenue, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632
Weston Woods, Weston, Connecticut 06883

Reaching Up: Scholastic Books, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

SRA Primary Kit: Science Research Associates, 1540 Page Mill Road, Palo Alto, California 94304.

Voxcom: Tapecon, Inc., 100 Clover Green, Peachtree City, Georgia 30269.